

## Video Transcript

**Title:** Emil Nolde | Colour is Life

**Duration:** 05:33

### Summary:

Emil Nolde (1867-1956) is one of the most celebrated artists of the twentieth century. His life and career was characterised by opposing ideologies, forces and identities, which he was profoundly aware of throughout his life. This short film introduces Nolde and the opposing forces within his life that had such an effect on his work as an artist.

## Transcript

### Narrator

Nolde's life and work was characterised by opposing ideologies forces and identities; and he was deeply aware of these tensions. His paintings tell the story of an artist at the forefront of the expressionist *Avant-Garde*, using colour and form in a bold visionary way, yet he struggled to find acceptance. He was too conservative for the *Avant-Garde*, too radical for the establishment, too modern for traditionalists. But out of the tensions and contradictions of Nolde's life emerge a ground-breaking and prolific body of work.

In the early twentieth century most aspiring artists looked to the prevailing style of French *Impressionism* for inspiration. Nolde accepted the importance of *Impressionism* for the nineteenth century but saw this style as too superficial, too sentimental, and too realistic for the twentieth century. He joined a group of artists called *Die Brücke*, pioneers of German Expressionism who abandoned realistic representations in favour of exaggerations and distortions of line and colour. They wanted art to go deeper to express the very spirit of life and nature. For Nolde, colour was the supreme means of expression. He said: "*Colour is strength, strength is life*".

Nolde claimed that the Bible was the only book he had ever read and was immensely proud of his religious paintings. But his Biblical artwork lacks any of the restraint you may

expect from a devout European Protestant. They're earthy, physical, agonized, erotic. In his painting *Ecstasy*, Nolde presents us with the possibility of a not so immaculate conception. The sexual and the sacred are presented as the same spiritual life force surging through Mary's body. It is a bold dualism - the hot and the holy as one on the canvas.

Nolde was a nationalist with a conflicted nationality. He was born in 1867 in Northern Germany in a territory that later became part of Denmark. He had a Danish passport but felt deeply German. He seemed torn between country and city settings; a provincial painter who celebrated the land and the sea of his native Northern Germany and Denmark in the summer. Yet he and his wife returned each winter to explore his fascination with the people in the cafés, cabarets, and theatres of Berlin. Nolde was never happier than when he was cut off from the world at his home in the Northern flatlands between the North and Baltic seas; but he also travelled widely and championed the art of different nations. He was openly critical of colonialism and his exotic paintings of tribal scenes reveal a deep interest in racial identity and the unique essence of different nations.

Nolde enthusiastically supported the Nationalist Socialist's vision for Germany. He perhaps also sensed an opportunity to be celebrated as a truly German artist but his paintings were stylistically too modern, too challenging, and too similar to the international modern art that the Nazis hated. His art was branded *degenerate* by the Nazi party in 1937. Emil Nolde had over a thousand works confiscated as part of Hitler's campaign against Avant-Garde art. He was displayed more prominently than any other artist in the humiliating exhibition of degenerate art that toured the major cities of Germany. As a degenerate artist Nolde was forbidden from exhibiting his work and was prohibited from purchasing art materials; and while he remained faithful to the Nazi party he was in effect banished back home to Northern Germany.

Despite his personal devastation over his treatment by the Nazi party Nolde's status as a degenerate artist ironically gave his art more breathing space. His exile did not suppress his artistic production during the war. Instead of large oil paintings Nolde produced over a

thousand small scale watercolours which he called his “unpainted pictures”. Nolde let his imagination and colours run wild. Mythical beasts emerge in fantasy landscapes, grotesque heads fight for space in claustrophobic compositions; the paper stained and re-stained with pigment to create an intense beauty. In these watercolours there's a sense of the contrasts and contradictions of his life. The expressionist and the romantic, the Northern and the German, the modern and the primal, the real and the spiritual finding a sense of harmony and always vibrant colour and bold form at the heart of his innovative work.